

# Implementing Mindfulness into Teaching English as a Second Language at the College Level : An Exploratory Study

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# Implementing Mindfulness into Teaching English as a Second Language at the College Level: An Exploratory Study

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex dynamics for college students to learn English as a second language (ESL) in the classroom setting and to identify the challenges that current English instructors face in teaching students with low-level English skills at the university level. The importance of learning English has constantly been emphasized in Japan with English as a mandatory subject throughout junior high school and senior high school. Also, the lingua franca of the global economy is English and many Japanese companies increasingly stress the need for English proficiency among their employees. Many high-profile Japanese companies such as Toyota and Nissan have announced making the use of English more common in the workplace (Shatil, 2010). In fact, Rakuten and Fast Retailing have made English their official language of operation (The Asahi Shimbun, 2013).

As the 2020 Tokyo Olympics approach, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has announced the “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” in order to enhance English Education, essentially from elementary through secondary school (MEXT, 2014, p. 1). Along with this trend, the techniques of learning English are often theoretically debated within the context of English language education. English instructors and researchers have been seeking effective and efficient ways to teach students English and experiment with various methods in the field in order to improve students’ English proficiency.

However, the actual situation in English classrooms at many Japanese universities might be far from the textbook ideal. Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita (2009) write that English instructors struggle with poor vocabulary of

their students because they cannot write or read English correctly. Takano (2004) mentions that Japanese students do not have a clear purpose in studying English or enough opportunities to use it in Japan. Thus, they lack motivation to study English. It is evident that there are many problems of English Education in Japan. However, English instructors' observations and teaching experiences in college classrooms have not been widely discussed and there is little research on the students' and instructors' observations on what goes on inside an ESL classroom.

This study will look for parallels between university students' perceptions of learning English and their academic performance through the author's observations while teaching approximately 250 ESL students throughout the 2014–2015 academic year. By characterizing and categorizing current university students' performance in English classrooms and identifying their attitudes toward studying English, hopefully insights will emerge that provide a better understanding of the real situation prevalent in many university English classrooms. This can lead English instructors to discover more effective approaches to teaching university students with low-level English skills.

Finally, this paper will identify a number of critical conditions in which English instructors currently do not receive sufficient support when they are emotionally exhausted and feeling burnt-out from teaching, especially those students who are lacking in English proficiency, motivation to learn, appropriate classroom social skills, and a positive attitude towards teachers and classmates. Addressing declining academic skills among university students is of importance, but at the same time, it is essential to look at how English instructors are affected and impoverished by the reality of teaching and interacting with students of very low proficiency level.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Background**

The author has taught English to approximately 250 students per academic year at a private university in Japan since 2013. In this study,

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classroom observation was employed to collect the data throughout the 2014–2015 academic year to describe students’ perceptions of studying English, their past experiences of studying the subject, their learning attitude, and their academic performance in the classrooms.

## **2-2. The target students of an investigation**

With the university’s English program policy, each department divides their students into levels based on the results of the General Test of English Language Proficiency (G-TELP). These levels are maintained across the basic ESL curriculum: English I -- General English for basic grammar and English II --English for Communication Skills (both taken by 1<sup>st</sup> year students), and English III -- Advanced English, which is taken by 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. Students are required to successfully complete all three courses for graduation.

Throughout the 2014–2015 academic year, the author was assigned to teach ten classes from various departments with levels ranging from the highest to the lowest proficiency. The average of the G-TELP score was 121.6 out of a possible 300. In this paper, classes in which students scored 121.6 or above are considered higher proficiency level and the classes that scored below 121.6 as lower level.

## **3. Findings**

### **3-1. Characteristics of higher level of English classes**

Of the three English classes where the students’ English levels were comparatively higher, the author found many students who had already completed the basic knowledge of English and acquired effective skills of how to study English at junior and senior high school. A majority of the students in the higher-level classes appeared at ease with studying and enjoyed improving their English ability during the class. They had confidence in studying English and were not afraid of asking for help when they encountered problems in class. They were eager to study harder and knew what to do in order to score well on quizzes and exams. Most of these students hardly missed class or arrived late. In these three classes, the author noticed that students

behaved respectfully toward not only the instructor but also their classmates during the class. In the higher level of English classes, both the students and the instructor were able to build a healthy classroom environment and establish a positive learning atmosphere with one another throughout the whole academic year. Many of the students demonstrated that their academic performance on quizzes and final exams improved compared to the beginning of the academic year.

### **3-2 Characteristics of lower level of English classes**

In contrast with the students discussed above, the students in lower-level of English classes often expressed significant difficulty in identifying the English alphabet and lacked confidence in studying English and finding opportunities to increase their knowledge. Many students exhibited negative attitudes such as a lack of respect for their classmates and teachers and lacked motivation to continue with their studies.

#### **3-2-1. Lack of knowledge of the basic English grammar**

Having six years of studying English in junior high and senior high school, students are expected to be able to distinguish the letters of the alphabet. According to the author's observations, however, some of the students did not even reach junior high school level. Shockingly, there were many students who were unable to display mastery of this fundamental skill.

For example, Student A (female, 1<sup>st</sup> year) could not distinguish "l" from "r". Student B (female, 1<sup>st</sup> year) was barely able to write her own name in English and generally could not distinguish the lower-case letters of the alphabet. Student C (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) mixed "b" with "d" and "p" with "q" when he tried to write English. It was revealing to discover that many students lacked proficiency in determining basic elements of English grammar after six years of formal study. Students also expressed difficulty with word order and the various parts of speech. For example, student D (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) failed to comprehend a story written in English because he did not understand the definitions of important grammatical features of English. Student E (male,

1<sup>st</sup> year) was unable to explain the role of a particular part of speech or use it correctly when writing English. These observations would suggest that such students could not enjoy studying English because they did not understand the basic elements of the language.

### **3-2-2. Lack of confidence in studying English**

Through teaching students with a low-level of English skills, the author observed that a number of students did not have confidence in their English proficiency. Before they gave themselves a second chance at learning English, many of them had already decided that they could not learn English. For example, Student F (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) claimed that he was poor at English in both junior high and senior high school and did not know how to study English. Student G (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) said that he did not hate English, but he was always poor at it in school. Student H (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) also mentioned that he was always bad at English ever since he began to study it in junior high school.

Some students were afraid of learning English because they had the mindset that they were never good at it. Student I (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) described that she was poor at English and terrified by the subject because she thought that it was not easy or fun to study. Student J (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) was always afraid of studying English, even though he insisted that he wanted to overcome his fear someday. Many students had unfavorable learning experiences when they were first introduced to English. It would seem unavoidable that such students would remain turned off to English, consider themselves incapable of learning it, and give up. Therefore, they arrive at the university with a negative mindset, which handicaps them right from the onset. Such students typically express limited motivation to study English.

### **3-2-3. Lack of opportunities to acquire the study skills**

It was noticeable that many of students with low-level English ability did not acquire productive study skills in the past. Many students floundered

before quizzes and exams because they panicked and did not know what to do or how to study English. For example, Student K (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) said that she was so bad at English and had no idea about how to study the subject. Student L (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) asked how he could ever begin to like English. Student M (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) said that she did not go to junior high school so she had no knowledge of basic English grammar and did not know how to study English or where to begin.

Also, it was apparent that these students never had an opportunity to recognize the value of English in daily life. They did not have the opportunity of need to use English while growing up. The limited need to use English in Japan provides little incentive to master it. Students coming from such a background are apt to lack motivation or to understand the benefits of learning English. Observing learning attitudes among such students and considering their past experiences suggest that 90 minute classes is too long for students to concentrate on a subject that they are intimidated by.

#### **3-2-4. Unhealthy relationships with English instructors in the past**

One of the most remarkable differences between students with low-level English and students with high-level English was their relationship with former English instructors. It was revealing that many students with low-level English skills remarked that they did not get along with their English teachers in the past. It seems, in part, that such students decided that they did not like English simply because they did not like the teachers, and developed negative attitudes toward studying English based on their personal feelings. For example, Student N (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) said that she did not like her former English instructor and lost interest in studying English. Student O (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) stated that she did not like her English teachers since junior high school. Even after she entered the university, she felt uncomfortable studying English in class and did not enjoy the class at all because of her English instructors. Student P (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) also mentioned that he did not get along with his previous English teacher when he was 1<sup>st</sup> year, so he decided to stop going to class. Feelings such as these would suggest

that a positive relationship between a student and teacher could be motivational in terms of studying the subject at hand.

### **3-2-5. Lack of motivation in studying English**

In lower-level English classes, students' motivation to study English was not high. There were students who had already given up completely and decided not to attend class at all. Some students continued to sleep during class even after the instructor admonished them not to. Other students could not focus on the lecture so they daydreamed, did not take notes and often forgot assignments.

For example, Student Q (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) was often late or absent. Student R (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) often arrived late and missed many classes as well. Student S (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) could not focus in class and kept talking to his classmates. Student T (male, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) habitually played with his phone or studied other coursework during class. Student U (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) not only arrived late and missed class repeatedly, but he also often forgot to bring something to write with, a notebook and his textbook to class.

It also needs to be stressed that students with lower motivation to study English did not try to find answers to questions. For example, Student V (male, 1<sup>st</sup> year) said he did not know the answer whenever the instructor called on him to answer a question. Not surprisingly, the students mentioned above did not perform well on their quizzes or exams. Students who lacked motivation to study English tended to have a significant deficiency in their understanding of English and their basic study skills in general.

### **3-2-6. Lack of respect for the instructor and other classmates**

McVeigh (2002) states, "Complaints from faculty of bad manners among students were widespread" (p. 200). There were some students who expressed resistance towards learning through rudeness in some of the author's lower level of English classes as well. McVeigh also notes, "Others clearly demonstrate resistance by making a clamor when they enter the classroom: slamming down backpacks and books, bumping and banging into desks, noisily



pulling out chairs, and talking to others after they have just arrived late” (p. 199). Among students with low-level English skills, there were some students who repeatedly arrived late to class, made other students feel uncomfortable and interrupted the lesson by making snide comments during the lecture. Those students frequently remained noisy during the class and sometimes sneered at the instructor when asked if they had any questions.

Through the author’s observations, it was clear that such students lacked not only study skills but also social skills. For example, Student W (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) used her backpack as a pillow on the desk and slept for the entire period throughout the academic year. In addition, she missed many classes and persistently arrived late. Even though she attended class, she did not bring anything to write with, a notebook or a textbook. Student X (female, 2<sup>nd</sup> year) also failed to attend the class regularly and often came late when she did attend. During class she played with her phone and sometimes left the classroom in the middle of the lecture without saying anything. Although these students did not attend or participate in class on a regular basis, they took the final exam on the last day and performed very poorly on it.

When there are students who are disrespectful and ill mannered, it affects the classroom atmosphere and puts great stress on both the instructor and the students, creating an unhealthy classroom.

#### 4. Discussion

Through teaching university students, especially those with low-level English skills, the author was able to uncover some of the problems and difficulties in teaching ESL at the college level. The author’s observations cleared that many students with low-level English skills lacked effective study skills, motivation in studying English and social skills. Some students disturbed the learning environment for other students in spite of their need for attention from the instructor and other students. Some of them appeared to lack the social and emotional ability to care about other people.

How can instructors teach in such needy classrooms? Teachers are expected to provide academic knowledge and to deliver effective learning

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resources to students. Teaching students with varied academic and emotional abilities is very challenging for the instructor. The author herself experienced a lot of stress, fatigue and emotional burnout after encountering situations where some belligerent students were obsessed with protecting themselves by agitating others to prevent learning. And yet there was no one for the instructor to ask for help nor any solid support system to improve the situation or to encourage instructors' care as the current educational system calls for.

With the ever decreasing birth rate, Japan is facing a time in which all applicants would be admitted to colleges and universities (White, Eguchi, Kawanaka, & Henneberry, 2005). This means that students who lack academic qualifications and social skills can still be admitted to university. In this case, it is critical to think about how university instructors will be able to cope with the challenges of more students with learning difficulties in the future—students like those described in this paper.

According to Jennings (2010), "Teaching is more socially and emotionally demanding than it has ever been in the past. Growing numbers of children come to school unprepared and often at risk of mental health and behavioral problems" (p.133). In order to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students in their classrooms, educators experience excessive stress and burnout. Roeser, Skinner, Beers, and Jennings (2012) describe how teachers' work is uncertain, emotional, and demanding. University instructors are no exception. They have become more overloaded and overwhelmed while they have to teach and interact with students of different levels of maturity and academic ability. An increasing number of university instructors have become overly stressed by students' disruptive behaviors and poor study skills in the classroom.

According to Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris and Katz (2013), teacher attrition is a serious problem in many parts of the world, including the US and the UK. Japan is no exception. Leaving the profession within their first five years of teaching has gradually been identified by educational institutions in Japan (Sasaki, Hosaka, & Akashi, 2010). Teaching at an academic level is a challenging and uncertain task; however, university

instructors usually do not receive the training to reduce stress, regulate emotions, and prepare to meet the constant demands of their jobs. The significance of teachers' care should be recognized for all educators in Japan and attention needs to be given to find solutions to help university instructors. Therefore, the teacher's social and emotional well-being is key to fostering a positive learning environment for students. If teachers are able to easily cope with stress and students' demands, they can be more relaxed, calm, and present in the classroom. Teachers' health and peace of mind should be recognized because it affects students' learning environment and social and academic outcomes.

## **5. Future Research Perspectives**

The author's observations suggest that there seems to be a disconnection between students, English as a second subject, and educators. Essentially, educators have to find a connection between students and educators toward the shared goal of learning together and recognizing that progress is attainable and worthwhile. Mindfulness could be one technique that creates a connection between students and educators, helps more effective communication, and relieves the stresses incurred in the process.

### **5-1. Possibilities of mindfulness training program for English instructors at the university level**

The importance of teacher's care has been discussed among educators. Mindfulness is one approach that has been reported to improve educators' social-emotional competence and enhance students' academic outcome. Mindfulness-based programs for teachers are being developed and experimented with in order to enhance the effectiveness of mindfulness teaching around the world (Albrecht, N., Albrecht, P., & Cohen, 2012).

Mindfulness has been defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Three key components of mindfulness are self-regulation of attention,

self-awareness, and self-compassion. These help individuals to recognize the emotional triggers of their stress reactions and install effective, non-reactive coping strategies when stress occurs (Abenavoil et al 2013; Roeser et al. , 2012). Mindfulness also creates a proactive classroom climate and healthy teacher-student relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

## **5-2. Mindfulness-based teaching programs**

There is a growing number of mindfulness-based programs and research for teachers and students. Examples of programs are listed below:

### **(1) Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE for teachers)**

CARE offers a professional development program that helps teachers to manage the stress so that they enjoy teaching again. It is designed as four one-day sessions spread over four to five weeks, with intersession coaching via phone and internet to support the application of CARE skills. CARE also offers a five-day intensive summer retreat at the Garrison Institute. CARE demonstrates how to bring mindfulness to challenging situations teachers face. Participants learn to enhance their relationships with their students, their classroom management, and curricular implementation through the program. Also, CARE introduces caring practice and mindful listening activities to encourage empathy and compassion.

### **(2) Mindfulness, Courage, and Reflection for Educators (Center for Mindfulness)**

The University of Massachusetts Medical School Center For Mindfulness offers an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program that includes guided instruction in mindfulness meditation practices, stretching and mindful yoga, group discussions aimed at enhancing awareness in everyday life and daily home assignments. They provide other programs such as five-week programs and online courses to promote the skill sets of learning in an effort to access and cultivate one's natural capacity to respond more effectively to stress, pain, and illness and become more effective teachers.

### **(3) Mindful Schools**

Mindful Schools offers online and live training for educators. The six-week online course provides the participants the basics of mindfulness meditation, techniques for coping with intense emotions, practices that cultivate compassion, forgiveness, and the role mindfulness plays in communication and interaction.

### **(4) Passageworks for Soul of Education Course for Teachers**

Online and live courses are provided to educators with practices and principles for supporting students' social and academic development, sustaining educators' own authentic teaching practice, and building a positive school culture. The courses are designed to reduce occupational stress and burnout, ease feelings of anxiety, and increase higher levels of self-compassion.

There are some research projects which examine the effect of mindfulness on educators. Abenavoil et al. (2013) report that educators' mindfulness had strong and consistent negative associations with three widely-studied components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment. Scientific research suggests that applications of mindfulness help reduce stress, increase health and well-being, and enhance self-compassion (Fujita, 2014). Roeser et al. (2012) discuss the positive effects of such mindfulness training programs, which support the formation of positive dyadic relationships between teachers and students. Warm classroom climate, which is based on the relationship between teachers and students, has a significant impact on both teachers and students. When students have pleasant relationships with teachers, they respect their teachers and become more engaged and motivated in learning.

However, most of the mindfulness training programs focus on educators of elementary, junior high and secondary schools and do not take into account the significance of university instructors' support and care. Moreover, the importance and effectiveness of mindfulness has not appeared

in the context of education in Japan as of yet. As this paper has posited, the reality of classroom challenges at Japanese universities continues to grow, with more incapable and immature students being accepted. As a result, more instructors in Japan suffer from emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack a sense of accomplishment. Since the positive effects of the practice of mindfulness have been reported in many countries, perhaps it should be explored in the context of university teaching in Japan.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has identified some of the growing challenges of teaching ESL at the university level in Japan. It has been suggested that the application of mindfulness might well be beneficial to university instructors and students alike. It is essential to share the reality of ESL classrooms at the university level because teaching is a challenging and demanding profession even at high levels and under the best of circumstances. In order for students to learn English more successfully, English instructors need to constantly research and experiment in order to discover and test the most effective methods to teach English. It is necessary for instructors to make an effort to teach creatively and efficiently so that students learn better, feel motivated, and become more engaged in their studies. However, given the declining number of students as well as their academic level, what the university instructors face in teaching and dealing with students has become more challenging. This paper has emphasized the importance of providing support and care for instructors' health and emotional well-being. Further research is called for in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the application of mindfulness in the context of education and how mindfulness approaches might be incorporated into teacher training in Japan. Mindfulness training has only recently been used to promote teachers' social and emotional well-being in the context of the demands of teaching (Roeser et al, 2012). Mindfulness has the potential to be of use for both instructors and students in the context of English education in the future. Thus, further exploration on the efficacy and application of mindfulness in the field of education is called for.

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